

PHOTOGRAPHY AT THE DOCK

*Essays on Photographic History,
Institutions, and Practices*

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Foreword by Linda Nochlin

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Who Is Speaking Thus? Some Questions about Documentary Photography

What is a documentary photograph? With equal justice one might respond by saying “just about everything” or alternatively, “just about nothing.” In support of the former reply, one could argue that insofar as any photographic image expresses an indexical relation to whatever appeared before the lens at the moment of exposure, that image is a document of *something*. From this expansive position, no photograph is more or less documentary than any other. Conversely, one could argue that the conception of photography as a faithful and unmediated transcription of physical appearances (residual traces of the ancient faith notwithstanding) has long since been abandoned. We therefore now take for granted that the camera produces representations—iconic signs—translating the actual into the pictorial. While photographs remain the only form of pictorial evidence routinely admitted in the courtroom, the once universal belief in the camera’s truth has been belied by everything from outright trumperies to the poreless faces of *Vogue* models.

But irrespective of its logical inconsistencies, amorphousness of definition, and epistemological vagueness, the category “documentary” remains in service as a workable, although untheorized, rubric. However, between the apparently unmediated (but still highly mediated) images of the electronic surveillance camera—the degree zero of camera as visual registry—and, for example, the emphatically personal and “expressive” photographs of postrevolutionary Iran taken by Gilles Peress, lies a very large and very gray area. We need to map this area more precisely in order to examine the assumptions, both implicit and explicit, that underlie this practice both historically and in the present.

To speak of documentary photography either as a discrete form of photographic practice or, alternatively, as an identifiable corpus of work is to run headlong into a morass of contradiction, confusion, and ambiguity. “Documentary” is itself a recent entry into the photographic lexicon;¹ it is not employed with any regularity before the late 1920s, nearly a century after its invention. Because the majority of photographic uses previous to the term’s introduction were what we would now automatically designate as documentary, it becomes clear that the documentary concept is historical, not ontological. Moreover, the word’s permutations are testimonial to the way photographic uses, and the

meanings ascribed to them, are constantly in flux, repositioned and reoriented to conform to the larger discourses which engender them.

The late arrival of the category documentary into photographic parlance implies that until its formulation, photography was understood as innately and inescapably performing a documentary function. Self-consciously defined art photography aside, to nineteenth-century minds the very notion of documentary photography would have seemed tautological. Indeed, the historic agenda of art photography throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries was to counter the popular view of photography as a brute transcriptive medium with claims for its subjective and expressive mediations. It is thus not surprising that when the notion of documentary was adapted to photographic practices as a specific genre, it was only after symbolism and aestheticism (in the stylistic form of pictorialism) had dominated photographic discourse for more than thirty years.

To make some sense of what is and has been meant by documentary, we need to examine it from three perspectives. As a historical construction it must be situated within the framework of its contemporary discourses, practices, and uses. How is the notion of documentary photography to be retrospectively differentiated from the plural field of nineteenth-century production? Is documentary to be narrowly defined as an investigative or didactic enterprise or broadly defined to include all nonaesthetic and informational uses? Is the avatar of documentary photography the police mug shot possessing evidentiary status,² the horse race's photo finish, or photography animated by social concern? Such questions suggest another framework altogether—that photography be approached semiotically. As part of a larger system of visual communication, as both a conduit and agent of ideology, purveyor of empirical evidence and visual "truths," documentary photography can be analyzed as a sign system possessed of its own accretion of visual and signifying codes determining reception and instrumentality.³ A range of factors can be considered including those that contribute to what Roland Barthes described as *l'effet du réel* as well as those types of subject matter that have come to effectively signify the documentary enterprise. Last, we would want to examine the position of documentary photography within the discursive spaces of the mass media (and, more recently, within the discursive spaces of the gallery and museum) in order to better grasp the role it plays, the assumptions and attitudes it fosters, the belief systems it confirms.

These three lines of inquiry all finally converge—and to a certain extent devolve—around the problem of realism; for it is pre-eminently photography's ostensible purchase on the real that materially determines both its instrumentality and its persuasive capacities. Bertolt Brecht's observation that "realism is an issue not only for literature: it is a major political, philosophical and practical issue and must be handled and explained as such" needs to be factored into the photographic field. There, to be sure, it will require its own forms of analysis and critique—photography is, after all, a medium of mechanical reproduction—but there are obvious homologies to realist constructions in other media.

Reflections of this kind are intended not to recuperate some notion of an authentic,

pure, or uncompromised documentary practice, but, rather, to sketch out the terms in which such photography has functioned both in the past and in the present. For the paradox that underlies those documentary practices that have defined themselves as critical of the status quo, or at very least reformist in intention, is that they normally operate within larger systems that function to limit, contain, and ultimately neutralize them. The issue here is not co-option as such, but the structural limitations of conventional documentary imagery to disrupt the textual, epistemological, and ideological systems that inscribe and contain it. Consequently, as Martha Rosler observed, "Documentary photography has been much more comfortable in the company of moralism than wedded to a rhetoric or program of revolutionary politics."⁴ For those who call for a new militant documentary practice cognizant of both the representation of politics and the politics of representation,⁵ a thorough awareness of what traditional documentary modes put in place is a prerequisite to any practice that attempts to go beyond it.

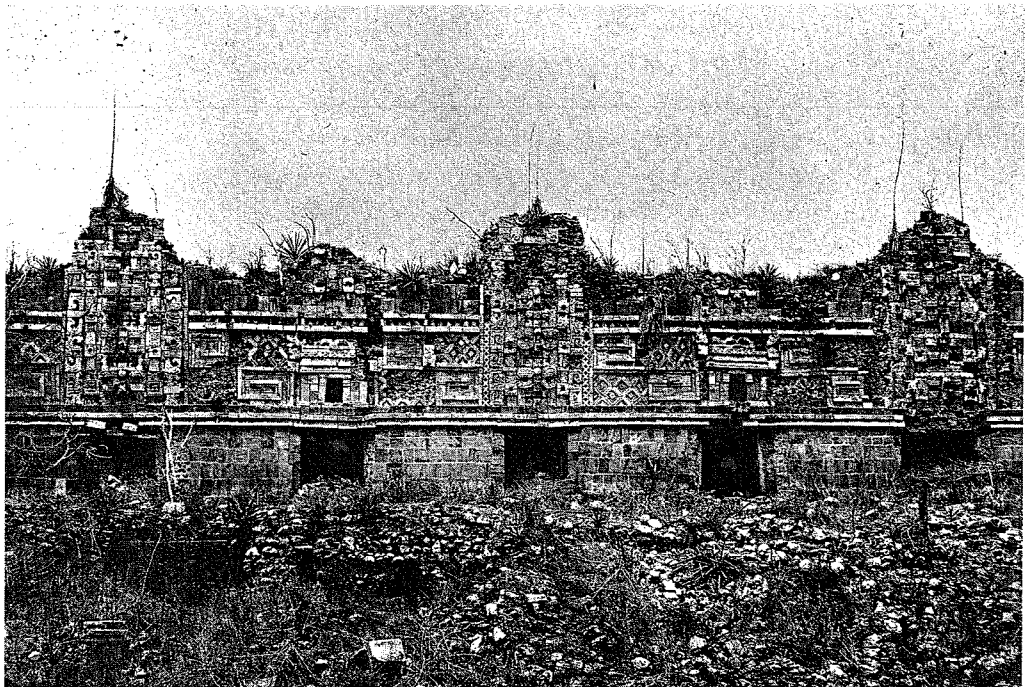
The status of photography at its birth hinged on what was thought to be its capacity for objective transcription. Photographic literature from the following two decades compulsively, almost ritualistically, repeats a litany of photographic truth. The world and its objects offered itself to the camera's lens, promising an encyclopedic visual registry—an inventory to be put at the service of science, commerce, physiognomy, empire, and art.⁶ Photographs from those early years include pictures of everyday objects, the contents of studios and libraries, corners of cottage gardens, farm implements, unremarkable architecture, the flotsam and jetsam of daily life, excluding only that which moved too rapidly for the long duration of exposure. In direct contrast to those images that clearly point to the desire to commemorate the singular and the unusual (freaks and wonders, the famous and powerful, the exotic, the Other) these pictures imply a fascination and delight in the act of photographic representation itself. That such images have been recently recuperated as art—for art—says a great deal about contemporary photographic discourse, but sheds little light on the meaning of these photographs as historical objects.

By the 1860s, photographic practice of the kind we now routinely label as documentary was thoroughly established: Désiré Charnay's pictures of Mayan ruins and Madagascan natives, Samuel Bourne's photographs of India and Nepal, Felice Beato's war photographs from the Crimea and the Opium Wars, Matthew Brady's staff's reportage on the Civil War, Francis Frith's plates of Egypt and the Holy Land, all are animated by the desire to fix and register a perceived reality into the two-dimensional space of representation.

But what, we must ask, is the real of representation? And, even more important, to what uses were these representations put? Discussing the social uses of photography, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu commented: "In stamping photography with the patent of realism, society does nothing but confirm itself in the tautological certainty that an image of reality that conforms to its own representation of objectivity is truly objective."⁷ Accordingly, photography functions to ratify and affirm the complex ideological web that at any moment in historical time is perceived as reality *tout court*. Thus,

the photographs depicting the “empty” spaces of Palestine and Egypt become themselves an important (visual) tributary of the progress of empire, the photographs depicting the exotic native Other become fuel for the *mission civilisatrice*. Similarly, the photographs of incarcerated hysterics commissioned by Dr. Charcot at the hospital of Salpêtrière prove and demonstrate at one and the same time the specular morphology of hysteria.⁸

Although these are somewhat loaded examples (emphasizing the particularly oppressive instrumentalities of the medium) they are in no way exceptional. The success of photography as an image-making technology—its amazingly rapid expansion and assimilation to all discourses of knowledge and power—was precisely a function of its confirmatory aspects. This in turn suggests why we cannot legitimately speak of a nineteenth-century documentary practice that in any way functioned against the grain of dominant ideologies. It would not have occurred to, say, Friedrich Engels, to have supplemented *The Condition of the Working Class in England* with photographs of the squalid housing conditions of Manchester.

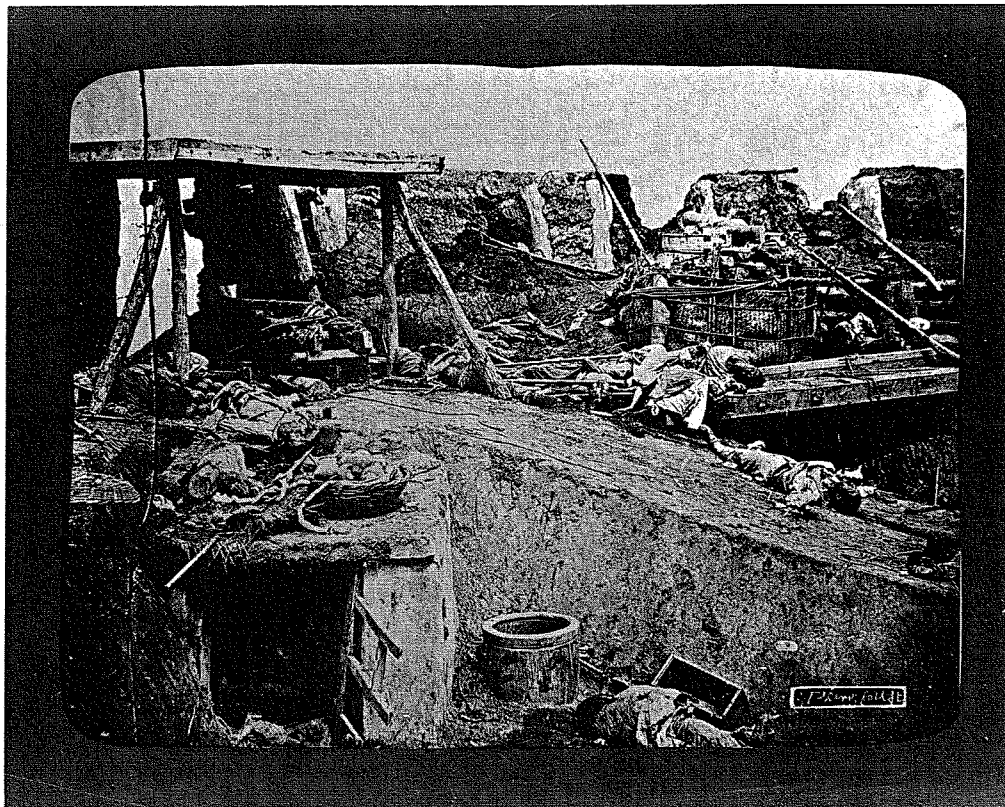


DÉSIRÉ CHARNAY, PALACE OF THE NUNS AT UXMAL, FACADE OF THE NORTH
WING, ALBUMEN PRINT. FROM CHARNAY, *CITÉS ET RUINES AMÉRICAINES*,
PARIS, 1863. CABINET DES ESTAMPES, BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE.

WHO IS SPEAKING THUS?

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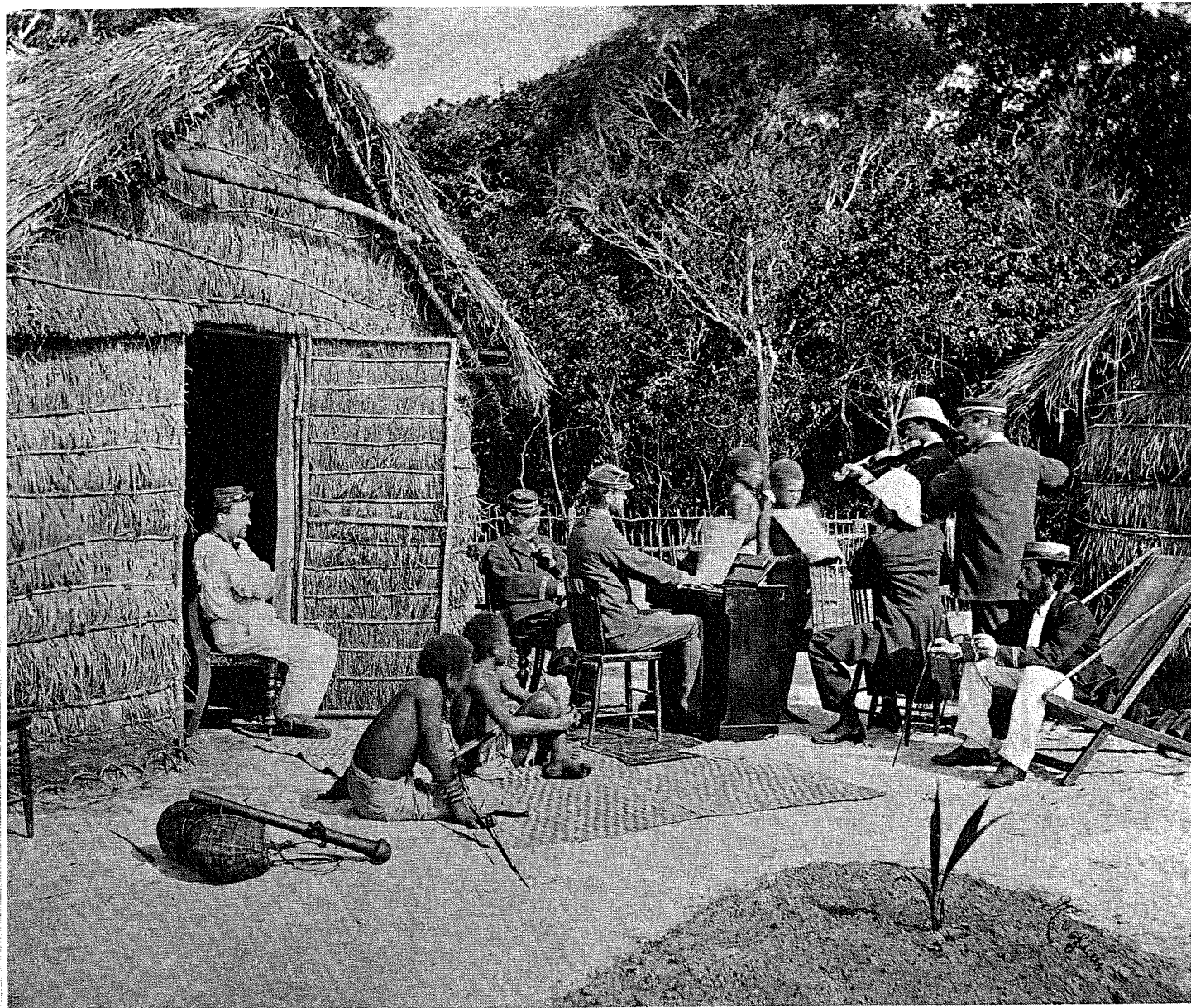
This did, however, occur to Jacob Riis in 1887 as part of his activity of police reporter and “crusading” journalist, and it is primarily for this reason that the retrospective construction of the documentary mode traditionally begins with him.⁹ In this model for documentary, the genre is defined within the framework of reformist or ameliorative intent, encompassing issues such as public address, reception, dissemination, the notion of project or narrative rather than single image, etc. Thus defined, Riis (1849–1914) appears as the logical candidate for progenitor insofar as his work was produced to provide the sensational visual supplement to his 1890 reformist tract *How the Other Half Lives*. Having worked as a police reporter, and then as a free-lance journalist for the New York City daily press, Riis took (and commissioned) photographs for only a few years at the end of the



FELICE BEATO, CHINA, THE TAKU FORTS AFTER THE ANGLO-FRENCH
ATTACK, 1861 (SECOND OPIUM WAR), PAPER PRINT FROM COLLODION ON
GLASS NEGATIVE. CABINET DES ESTAMPES, BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE.

WHO IS SPEAKING THUS?

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ALLAN HUGHAN, *MUSICAL EVENING GIVEN BY FRENCH OFFICERS IN THE ILE
DES PINS, NEW CALEDONIA, CA. 1870-71*, ALBUMEN PRINT FROM GLASS NEGATIVE,
48 CM. × 32 CM. FROM HUGHAN, *SOUVENIRS AU VOYAGES DE LA MISSION D'EXPLORATION
ENVOYÉE EN NOUVELLE CALÉDONIE PAR LA COMPAGNIE DE LA NOUVELLE
CALÉDONIE*, CABINET DES ESTAMPES, BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE.



JACOB RIIS, *MIDNIGHT IN LUDLOW STREET*, 1888-90, GELATIN-SILVER PRINT MADE
FROM ORIGINAL NEGATIVE, 9 1/2 x 7 5/8. MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK.

1880s. These photographs (frequently taken with the recently invented magnesium flash that permitted the photographer to work in dark interiors) were reprinted as half-tone illustrations for the book or projected as lantern slides. In her important article "Making Connections with the Camera: Photography and Social Mobility in the Career of Jacob Riis," Sally Stein produced a detailed and wholly persuasive account of the latent, rather than manifest, meanings of Riis's photographs. This analysis was interwoven with a scrutiny of Riis's writing to the extent that both activities could be seen to converge within a dense matrix of bourgeois social anxieties and the need to assuage them. This matrix was constituted by the threat posed by large numbers of poor, unassimilated recent immigrants, the specter of social unrest, the use of photography as a part of the larger enterprise of surveillance, containment, and social control, and the imperatives of "Americanization." Within this framework, Stein examined the role played by Riis's personal ambition and his assumption of the mantle of crusader as an agency of social ascent. By rigorously

surveying the contextual field in which this body of work functioned, Stein made a major contribution to the ongoing critique of traditional documentary forms, one of whose chief emphases is an interrogation of the subject/object relations that such photography normatively puts in place.

For example, in describing Riis's predilection for imaging his subjects in ways that deny any notion of the photographic act as a transactional one, Stein makes the following observation: "We can indeed marvel at the consistency of Riis's photography in which so few of the exposures presented a subject sufficiently composed to return the glance of the photographer. That he rejected those rare photographs in which the subject did happen to look back suggests how premeditated this effect was. . . . The averted gaze, the appearance of unconsciousness or stupefaction, were only a few of the recurring features which gave Riis's pictorial documents stylistic unity and ideological coherence in relation to the text."¹⁰ By refusing to reiterate the conventional pieties surrounding representations of the poor and the marginal, and by bringing to light hidden agendas inscribed in such photography, Stein reveals a secondary level of signification that radically questions a too-easy conflation of "victim photography" with progressivism and reform. But the issues explored by Stein in relation to this specific corpus of photographs have a far more general application. We must ask whether the *place* of the documentary subject as it is constructed for the more powerful spectator is not always, in some sense, given in advance. We must ask, in other words, whether the documentary act does not involve a double act of subjugation: first, in the social world that has produced its victims; and second, in the regime of the image produced within and for the same system that engenders the conditions it then re-presents.¹¹

The discourse of documentary that places Jacob Riis at its origin lays a certain stress on the notion of instrumentality (as though all other forms of photography were not inevitably instrumentalized). This conception of documentary photography is one whose prestige and influence has variously expanded and shrunk, had its ideological parameters altered, and its constitutive terms modified and retooled. In the 1930s, a period in which (at least in America) documentary forms in film, photography, and letters were most privileged, both liberals *and* radicals conceived of the form as adequate to explicitly defined political ends. Notwithstanding the contemporary critique of photographic transparency and autonomy launched by Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin (fueled, when not specifically modeled, on the theories of the Soviet avant-garde), the prevalent conception of a politicized documentary focused largely on subject matter. The perceptual and representational critique generated by art movements as various as cubism, dada, surrealism, constructivism, and, of course, photomontage, cannot be said to have had much influence on either the theory or the practice of documentary.

Accordingly, projects such as the Farm Security Administration's documentary enterprise,¹² a large-scale, federally funded propaganda machine initially conceived to foster support for New Deal relief programs, took for granted that a photography of advo-

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ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN, *SHARECROPPER'S WIFE*, ARKANSAS, 1935.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.



DOROTHEA LANGE, *MIGRANT AGRICULTURAL WORKER'S FAMILY*, 1936.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

cacy or reform should effectively concentrate on subject matter. The subject was, in all senses, the given; Roy Stryker, the director of the project, not only stipulated the specifics of region, milieu, or activity when making assignments, he often further indicated what type of mood, expression, “feeling” he was after—what we would now term the rhetoric of the image. Those photographers, like Walker Evans, who had their own aesthetic agendas did not fare well at the F.S.A.

While in no way disputing the fact that the ways in which Riis represented his subjects were markedly different from those employed by Lewis Hine, and, later, the F.S.A. photographers, we are nonetheless confronted with some unchanging tropes. One such trope consists of the depiction of the subject—and the subject’s circumstances—as a pictorial spectacle usually targeted for a different audience and a different class. Another concerns the immobilizing effect produced by presenting the visual “fact” of individual vic-

timization or subjugation as a metonym for the (invisible) conditions that produced it. Such an effect may be produced irrespective of good intentions, personal or institutional politics, or ameliorative intent. Moreover, to the extent that photography is less able to deal with collectivity than with individuality, work such as the F.S.A. project demonstrates a probably inevitable slippage from the political to the anecdotal or the emblematic. Indeed, the very working methods of some of the F.S.A. photographers attest to a preference for the poignant over the militant. When subjects smiled into the camera, they were stage-managed into more somber poses; sharecroppers who wore their best clothes to be photographed were told to change into their ragged everyday wear, persuaded not to wash begrimed hands and faces for the camera.¹³

As William Stott points out, there was a distinctly doctrinal aspect to the F.S.A. project. Insofar as the mandate of the program was to bolster popular and governmental support for New Deal relief policies, it was images of the "worthy" as opposed to the "unworthy" poor that were promoted. Commenting on the work of Dorothea Lange, the film-maker Pare Lorentz noted the following: "She has selected with an unerring eye. You do not find in her portrait gallery the bindle-stiffs, the drifters, the tramps, the unfortunate, the aimless dregs of a country."¹⁴ In other words, the appeal made to the viewer was premised on the assertion that the victims of the Depression were to be judged as the deserving poor, and thus the claim for redress hinged on individual misfortune rather than on systematic failure in the political, economic, and social spheres. Lange, married to the economist Paul Schuster Taylor (with whom she collaborated on books such as *An American Exodus*), knew as well as anyone that the conditions she photographed were the consequences of capitalist crisis and neither acts of God nor arbitrary misfortune. Nonetheless, as a photographer her instinct was to individualize and personalize—to present her subjects as objects of compassion and concern.

The photographer's desire to build pathos or sympathy into the image, to invest the subject with either an emblematic or an archetypal importance, to visually dignify labor or poverty, is a problem to the extent that such strategies eclipse or obscure the political sphere whose determinations, actions, and instrumentalities are not in themselves visual. Moreover, photographs retain their specificity only briefly; much of the graphic legacy of the F.S.A. is currently embalmed in a collective nostalgia about the 1930s, or enshrined as a humanist monument to the timeless struggle against adversity, or revered as a record of individual photographic achievement.¹⁵ Child laborer, tenant farmer, disenfranchised black, the (once) living subject whose existence testified to the injustice and abuses bred within a political and social system, now becomes testimony to the photographer's eye and the photographer's art.

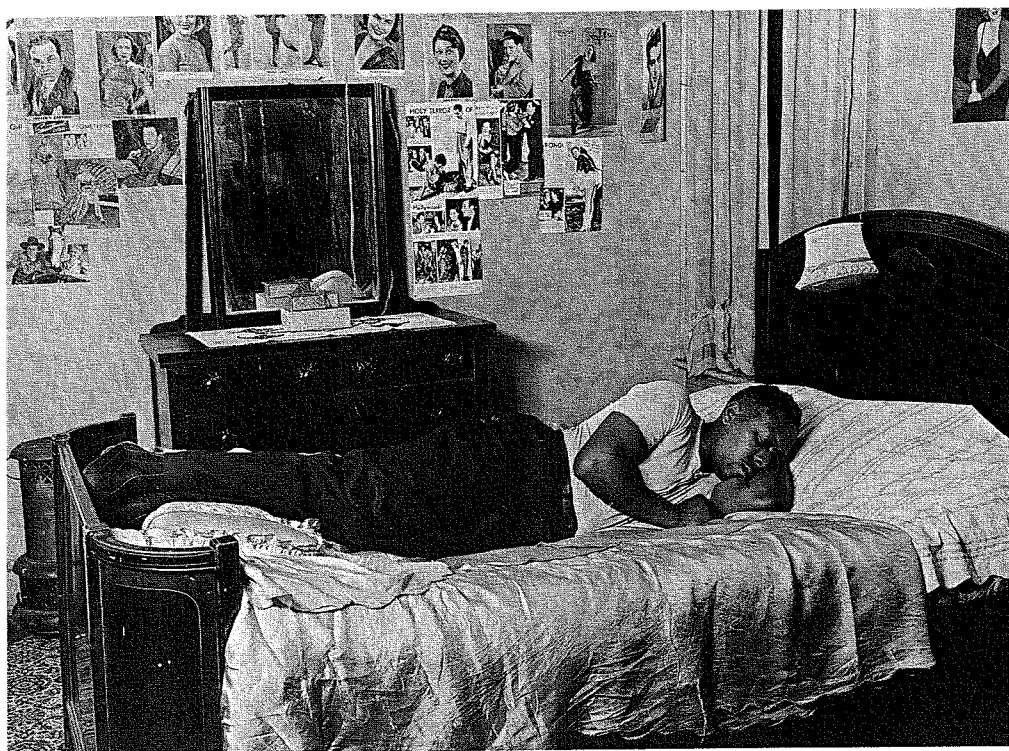
But the fact that a photograph's context is a powerful determinant of its perceived meaning is only one aspect of the problem. Furthermore, it should be stressed that the influences on photographic meaning produced by the framing context extend beyond the obvious polarities of gallery wall or magazine page. For within that latter space, the sur-

rounding editorial environment, the nature of caption and text, the sequencing of images, and the competing mass of other images (e.g., the ads that might appear on the same page) variously influence the way in which the images will be read and interpreted.

In her now-classic essay on documentary photography, Martha Rosler points out that "imperialism breeds an imperialist sensibility in all phases of cultural life."¹⁶ Indeed, one of the principal emphases of her argument concerns the way in which dominant social relations are inevitably both reproduced and reinforced in the act of imaging those who do not have access to the means of representation themselves. Further, in the absence of a progressive or reformist political and social environment such as that which fostered the work of Lewis Hine or the F.S.A., documentary photography becomes differently inflected. "The exposé, the compassion and outrage fueled by the dedication to reform has shaded over into combinations of exoticism, tourism, voyeurism, psychologism and metaphysics, trophy hunting—and careerism."¹⁷

But while photographers compose and organize their images to yield certain meanings, rarely is a photograph's subject neutral or unmarked to begin with. Added to the significance of subject matter on the level of denotation and connotation, and to the significance produced by contextual factors, are those elements supplied through mechanisms internal to the apparatus which also serve to structure meaning. These mechanisms in and of themselves produce certain effects, perhaps the most important one in photography being Barthes's "reality effect." In part, this derives from the fact that photography, like all camera-made images such as film and video, effaces the marks of its making (and maker) at the click of a shutter. A photograph appears to be self-generated—as though it had created itself. We know the photographer had to have been on the scene—indeed, this serves as a further guarantee of the image's truth—but the photographer is manifestly absent from the field of the image. Instead, we are there, we are seeing what the photographer saw at the moment of exposure. This structural congruence of point of view (the eye of the photographer, the eye of the camera, and the spectator's eye) confers on the photograph a quality of pure, but delusory, presentness. A photograph, as Victor Burgin once remarked, is an offer that cannot be refused.¹⁸ Moreover, unlike hand-made images in which the depicted image lies on the surface of the paper or canvas, the image in a photograph appears to be *in* it, inseparable from its ground; conceptually, you cannot lift the image from its material base.¹⁹ Phenomenologically, the photograph registers as pure image, and it is by virtue of this effect that we commonly ascribe to photography the mythic value of transparency.

A further structuring instance lies in the perspective system of representation built into camera optics in photography's infancy. Modeled on the classical system of single-point monocular perspective invented in the Renaissance, camera optics were designed to yield an analogous pictorial structure. While natural vision and perception have no vanishing point, are binocular, unbounded, in constant motion, and marked by loss of clarity in the periphery, the camera image, like the Renaissance painting, offers a static, uniform



AARON SISKIND, *MAN IN BED*, 1940, GELATIN-SILVER PRINT, 8 5/8 × 12 IN.

COLLECTION, THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK.

MS. SOPHIE BLACK.

field in which orthogonals converge at a single vanishing point. Such a system of pictorial organization, by now so imbued in Western consciousness as to appear altogether natural, has certain ramifications. Chief among these is the position of visual mastery conferred upon the spectator whose ideal, all-seeing eye becomes the commanding locus of the pictorial field. This spectatorial position of perspectival and pictorial mastery has been theorized as being an inherently ideological construction. "The world is no longer an 'open and unbounded horizon.' Limited by the framing, lined up, put at the proper distance, the world offers itself up as an object endowed with meaning, an intentional object, implied by and implying the action of the 'subject' which sights it."²⁰ Such analyses of the apparatus bring us a good deal closer to understanding why the use of the camera has historically engendered a vocabulary of mastery, possession, appropriation, and aggression; to shoot a picture, to take a picture, to aim the camera, and so forth.

If we accept the formulation that there are ideological effects inherent in the apparatus, and that these effects typically devolve on relations of mastery, scopic command, and

the confirmation of subject positions, the notion of a political documentary practice premised on subject matter alone is rendered even further problematic. For such a theorization of photography insists on the complicity of representational structures in a variety of ideological formations that will always impose a point of view independent of the personal politics of a photographer and the particular intention of the work. Furthermore, if we consider the act of looking at photographs with respect to gender or the operations of the psyche—the complex acts of projection, voyeurism, investiture, fantasy, and desire that inform our looking—we are obliged to abandon the earlier, innocent belief that the documentary camera presents us with visual facts that were simply “out there” and which we now, simply and disinterestedly, observe and register.

By invoking the question “who is speaking thus?” in relation to the documentary enterprise, my intention has been threefold. First, to establish the contingency and historical relativity of the category documentary which can then be seen as “spoken” within a particular historical frame. Second, albeit in highly summary fashion, to indicate that individual documentary projects, themselves products of distinct historical circumstances and milieus, “speak” of agendas both open and covert, personal and institutional, that inform their contents and, to a greater or lesser extent, mediate our reading of them. It is properly the work of historians and critics to attempt to excavate these coded and buried meanings, to bring to light those rhetorical and formal strategies that determined the work’s production, meaning, reception, and use. Nonetheless, it is incumbent upon an intelligent viewer to reject a specious universalist reading that functions to “innocent” photography of its ideological labor, its (normative) dissemination of the doxa. Last, the documentary photograph, like any other, is “spoken” within language and culture; its meanings are both produced and secured within those systems of representation that *a priori* mark its subject—and our relations to the subject—in preordained ways. The fact that a photograph appears to speak itself, as do realist forms in general, should alert us (as Roland Barthes tirelessly pointed out) to the working of ideology which always functions to naturalize the cultural.

The recent critiques of traditional documentary forms, from which many of the ideas in this essay have been drawn (notably the work of Victor Burgin, Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, and Sally Stein), are, significantly, critiques from the Left. Perhaps even more important, the three latter critics are committed to a renewal, rather than revival, of documentary practice predicated on a full awareness of the role played by context, subject/object relations, and the various structuring mechanisms that determine photographic meaning. It should be noted too that Rosler, Sekula, and Stein have all produced their own documentary projects, although apologists for traditional forms of documentary might be loathe to recognize their work as such.²¹ While certain of the ideas underpinning the call for a militant, oppositional documentary can be traced backward to Brecht’s and Benjamin’s insistence that reproductions of reality were powerless to say anything about that reality and that an authentically political photographic practice must be “set up” and

"constructed" (as, for example, in the photomontages of John Heartfield), this is only one, by no means inclusive theme. Of even greater importance has been the attention paid by proponents of a radicalized documentary to issues of audience, reception, and address accompanied by a concomitant conviction that a politically instrumental form must work against passive contemplation or voyeuristic consumption of the images.

It seems increasingly justified to speak of a new generation of photographers who are committed to rethinking documentary in a rigorous and serious way. Although it is not possible to characterize generally approaches to the form as disparate as those employed by Deborah Bright, Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge, Connie Hatch, Lisa Lewenz, Fred Lonidier, Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, and Elizabeth Sisco (to name only a few), there are nonetheless a few common denominators. Among others, these would include an insistence on maintaining control over the work in terms of exhibition, publication, or distribution. While a photographer such as Dorothea Lange was well aware of the multiple determinations of photographic meaning (indeed, it was Lange who formulated the notion of a "tripod" of meaning—image, caption, text), she had, in fact, very little control over the use of her images except in the books she collaborated on. In addition, this new form of documentary takes account of photography's textuality; its embeddedness within discursive or institutional systems that the photographer must try to comprehend in advance. It is no doubt for this reason that textual strategies play such an important role in work as distinct in form and content as Fred Lonidier's *Health and Safety Game* or Martha Rosler's *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*.

There is some irony in the fact that at the same time as much recent criticism and theory (and certain art production) is increasingly concerned with the instrumental and ideological functioning of photography, these new forms of documentary practice find themselves progressively marginalized within the precincts of both the photography and art world. In addition to the inevitable problems of venue and exposure, such enterprises are beset by questions and problems of self-definition, intent, form of address, and practical functioning. That these concerns emerge so insistently is a function of the seriousness and ambition of the work, not of its weakness. Pushing the boundaries of documentary form as conventionally understood, and asserting the textuality of photographic imagery, such work attempts to function critically in a double sense; externally, in that it deals with social and political realities, and internally, in that its critical operation is turned equally, inwardly, upon itself.

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